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Environment Secretary Signs Emergency Declaration to Help Lessen Fire Danger, Provide for Quick, Cost-Effective Disposal of Vegetative Waste

(Santa Fe, NM) —New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) Secretary Ron Curry has signed an emergency declaration to provide for faster and more cost-effective disposal of waste from forest thinning operations. This declaration allows for the temporary operation of NMED-registered air curtain incinerators (ACIs) without a permit. This temporary authorization is based on the emergency need to reduce imminent fire dangers in many New Mexico communities.

“When properly operated and registered with this Department, ACI’s are an effective tool in the effort to dispose of vegetative waste,” said Secretary Curry. “ACI’s meeting NMED requirements also have the added benefit of reducing emissions for most pollutants by 80-90 percent compared to simply piling the slash and burning it.”

ACI’s operate by forcefully projecting a curtain of air across an open chamber or pit in which slash is burned. This method creates more complete combustion of the waste therefore reducing air emissions.

“This is another arrow in our quiver, but by no means is it the only one,” said Cindy Padilla, NMED Solid Waste Bureau Chief. “Vegetative Waste is piling up at landfills across the state. NMED still strongly supports chipping and other methods to create beneficial uses for this woody waste. We need to use all of these tools to in a way that is protective of human health and the environment.”

The Village of Angel Fire as well as Otero and Sandoval Counties have applied for grants offered by the State Forestry Division to use this combustion method. It is expected that with easier permitting more communities will explore this waste reduction option.

Before this declaration, communities would have been required to obtain a solid waste facility permit from the Environment Department’s Solid Waste Bureau and an air quality permit from the Air Quality Bureau in order to operate an ACI. This declaration temporarily allows these incinerators to be registered rather than permitted. Meanwhile, the Solid Waste Bureau will be proposing amendments to its regulations to substantially reduce the regulatory burden on these facilities, but still ensure environmental protection. The Air Quality Bureau is in the process of developing a general construction permit for these facilities, which will also substantially reduce permitting burdens.

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The ACI declaration includes several conditions to ensure that human health and the environment are protected. These include requiring proper disposal of ash, public notice that an ACI application has been filed and limits on the amount of waste that can be burned per hour. ACI's are also only permitted to burn yard refuse, wood waste, forest slash or other vegetative material. These facilities are prohibited from burning waste that has been contaminated by other solid waste, manure, treated wood, or wood or sawdust from commercial operations.

For more information contact Jon Goldstein, Communications Director, NMED at (505) 827-0314.

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